

Ryan Brownlow and Megan Wood, "Not About White Workers: The Perils of Popular Ethnographic Narrative in the Time of Trump," *Lateral* 6.2 (2017).

<https://doi.org/10.25158/L6.2.8>

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Issue 6.2 (Winter 2017) — Not a Trump Issue

Not About White Workers: The Perils of Popular Ethnographic Narrative in the Time of Trump

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ABSTRACT This essay raises three concerns about popular contemporary ethnographies that focus on the rural and white "working class." First, these ethnographies are not treated as partial accounts of cultural experience but are instead taken as straightforward political and economic analyses. Second, these ethnographies amplify an "empathy mandate," which demands that our political actions center on trying to understand misunderstood populations—in this case, the so-called "white working class." Third, by disarticulating the cultural markers of "working classness" from the material conditions of class, these ethnographies obscure the political significance of "working class." Ethnographies of "white working class" experience may be useful only if we treat them as small openings that lead to bigger and broader stories, rather than as complete and transparent explanations of what is going on.

Introduction

Since the 2016 election of Donald Trump, the US political scene has been animated with efforts on the left and on the right to make sense of an undeniable feeling of crisis. Many of these efforts have focused on a particular group: America's white working class. Immediately after the election, mainstream news media sounded off with headlines like "Why Trump Won: Working-class Whites" (*New York Times*).¹ They identified the election of Trump and racial unrest as the "Revenge of the Forgotten Class" (*ProPublica, Politico*)², and their front-pages characterized Trump's election success as "a decisive demonstration of power by a largely overlooked coalition of mostly blue-collar white and working-class voters."³ Hundreds of political commentators, bloggers, and activists spilled significant ink as they culturally deconstructed the "white working class." These stories which claimed to make sense of the success of Trumpism used exit polls and quantitative voting data to figure a "white working class" based on a dubious composite of demographic factors like education or geography,⁴ but what was perhaps more integral to this crystallization of the explanatory power of white working class resentment was the timely emergence of a number of popular ethnographies about "white working class" cultural and political life.

These ethnographic texts devote themselves to accounting for the experiences of the white, rural, poor.⁵ Most often, they offer stories about white working-class "cultures in decline" or stories about a "culture of poverty." The narratives tend to suggest that the politics of the workers who live in selected rural areas are motivated by anxiety around issues of automation, globalization, environmental regulation, and/or immigration—issues that are seen as threats to job security—and that the anxiety often manifests itself in the form of conservatism, racism, or xenophobia. In these stories, the white working class is most often attributed a misguided conservative political sensibility, allegedly out of accord with their own best interests, that is motivated by what is described varyingly as a sense of fear, anger, betrayal, or resentment.

This growing body of texts is not a homogenous group; in fact, many of the arguments made among the group contradict each other, and their authors write from a range of political positions, with a wide range of political projects and objectives. The texts make claims to a variety of genres: sometimes they are called “memoir” or “non-fiction” and at other times they make more formal claims to the disciplinary domains of history, anthropology, or sociology.⁶ What binds the texts together is a focus on the white working-class (although *who* constitutes the white working-class or *where* precisely that class is located varies between accounts). The “white working class” in these texts is usually conflated with the population of one of a few geographical regions (e.g., “Rust Belt,” “The South,” “Coal Country,” etc.) and the forms of industrial labor conducted in those areas. The labors traditionally supported in these regions (e.g., manufacturing, coal mining, agriculture, etc.) are, by most accounts, becoming more precarious and less viable as reliable sources of income.

What we are interested in is how the recent emergence, proliferation, and popular success of these texts—texts that center the white working class as a cultural and political problem—seem to be creating a context of their own that enables certain kinds of explanation, rationale, and understanding that are used not only to make sense of the election, but also to breathe new life into old rationales for the Left (and the Right) about strategies of political resistance and opposition.⁷ These ethnographies not only enunciate forms of resistive action (e.g. what we will refer to later as the empathy mandate), they are themselves “resistance texts”: Hochschild’s *Strangers in Their Own Land*, for instance, graces the top of the *Huffington Post*’s Resistance Bookshelf, which tells you what to read “If you’re a part of the Trump resistance.”⁸ Other texts from this group are featured in vision statements crafted for liberal politics,⁹ and they are frequently used in workshops with titles like, “How to Talk to Trump Supporters.”¹⁰ Many of the authors of these books have become public intellectuals and political spokespeople for the current US crisis, seemingly overnight, as if they are the endowed ambassadors for the white working class peoples that their books narrate.¹¹ It is clear, on multiple accounts, that these books have met an unprecedentedly strong appetite among popular audiences, and that they have secured a place in the national, political imagination, especially by way of their uptake in political journalism as “evidence” of the political influence and character of a “white working class.”¹² Consequently, one of our most pressing concerns is how the stories about white workers that are first told in the books we have referenced gain new life and meaning as they are taken up in popular and political journalism.

While it is not exactly clear why so many books that narrate white working-class culture and experience are finding themselves successful in the present moment, what is clear is that people around the country and across the political spectrum are looking for answers, for ways to understand what is happening in the country. The fact is that most of the books we are referring to were published before the election and some of them are the product of long-term research projects that would have begun years before Trump’s presidential nomination and campaign. None of the books were intended as direct commentary on the electoral victory of Donald Trump, but what is interesting is how (in their timeliness, perhaps) they have become explanations for the current political situation. The convenience (and consequence) of these stories is that they seem to say something new and definitive about class politics in the US in the contemporary moment, they seem to locate a center for national, racial discord, and they seem to illuminate a source for the coming revolution (or catastrophe!).

We are interested in these texts, then, not because of the accounts they offer as much as we are interested in how their success tells us something about *how* people understand (or *want* to understand) what is going on in America. They tell us something about the

formation of popular thought in relation to politics in the United States. We are interested, in short, in how these popular ethnographic narratives mobilize certain stories about the current situation; they offer powerful stories about the feelings and lived experiences of one (imagined) class of peoples in the United States. While we recognize that these narratives are in and of themselves interesting, we are more concerned with how the narratives produce and enable certain kinds of explanation while ignoring or foreclosing others. We do not suggest that the stories are unimportant, but rather that they may be insufficient to understand what is going on and inadequate to the task of imagining better political futures.

Our discussion of the texts is intended as a critique of their use and reception in the current moment, particularly considering their representation and citation as “hard” evidence of a class in crisis, and also how they are being articulated to the current political situation. Journalists and political commentators across the political spectrum have used the books, whether or not they have actually read them, to conjure and reify the assumption that the white working-class is somehow responsible for Trump’s success. Assembling popular audiences, these books tell a story about a nation riddled with a complicated politics of feeling. They tell us something about the lived experience and realities of white workers in various locales around the country, and the many ways that those workers are mobilized by right-wing political forces. Our concern, however, is that these narratives offer stories that are too simple, and insufficient.

The editors of this special issue argue that the crisis we are facing is not about Trump. In agreement, the authors of this essay claim that it is equally as important to establish that, contrary to the dominant ways that Trumpism has been diagnosed in public conversation, this crisis is also not about white workers. Furthermore, any modes of resistance and opposition to the (post-populist, fundamentalist, racist, nationalist) forces at play *require first* that we rethink the tools we use to construct them. Following the aims of this special issue, we focus on political strategies and methods of resistance in the sense that we call for critical and contextual thinking, reading, and acting, especially in the face of a moment defined by a seemingly limitless number of powerful and evocative stories. More deeply, our call is for reimagining our political strategies and activism on the left, especially to the extent that they hinge upon an engagement with class relations, socio-economic difference, work, and poverty. We insist that the skills we learn as students of cultural studies, with its emphasis on critical and contextual thinking, equip us well for the task of thinking hard about how popular stories often fall flat before the task of understanding what is going on in our world, and how we might imagine our own interventions in a world where those stories proliferate.

Each of the following three sections identifies and discusses different aspects of the problematic we have identified in relation to ethnographies about the “white working class” and their role in producing popular understanding and political consciousness. In these sections, we draw upon the work of practitioners and critics of ethnography, several of the popular ethnographies in question, and offer anecdotes of our own struggle with this story of “white working class” resentment. For the sake of clarity, we limit our engagement here to only two of the ethnographic texts we have discussed: J. D. Vance’s *Hillbilly Elegy* and Arlie Hochschild’s *Strangers in Their Own Land*. There are many reasons we choose to focus on these two texts in particular, but the chief among those reasons is that the authors of these two texts sit on opposite ends of the political spectrum (and yet many of their conclusions, as we will show, are the same). When we discuss the ethnographic narratives in question, our task is not to critique ethnographic field methods nor offer a better model for conducting ethnographic research.¹³ Rather, we want to make some suggestions in terms of how we might be more critical readers and

interpreters of ethnographic narratives, and how we might cultivate critical reading skills and use them to intervene upon the impoverished and reductive political commentaries and strategies, often spurred by such ethnographic narratives, that are in rampant circulation across the political spectrum. In our conclusion, we offer a few thoughts about how cultural studies might be put to use to help us understand what is going on in our nation and world, and how it might light a path toward a renewed, recontextualized politics of class.

1. The Problem of Taking Ethnographic Narratives For Granted

One of our primary concerns about the aforementioned ethnographic narratives relates to how they have become a facet of popular culture and political explanation, exceeding the scope of any academic, disciplinary practice that might formally be understood as “ethnography.” We wonder what their popular status means about their circulation and reception, and also about the kind of thinking they produce, especially in the wake of the election. For nearly half a century (or more), practitioners and critics of ethnography have wondered about the contributions that ethnographic practice can make in its relation to a broader project of critical, contextual analysis that aims to put culture into conversation with things that are usually understood as non-cultural (e.g., economics or politics). These writers have questioned what ethnographic research can tell us about the world and what it cannot, and thus, they have also reckoned with the critical limitations of ethnographic narrative as a form of explanation. Unfortunately, in the popular circulation of contemporary ethnographies that focus on the feelings, labors, and traditions of white and rural populations, the lessons offered to us by these insightful practitioners and critics are lost. In the contemporary moment, as these popular ethnographic tales are taken up by journalists as political explanations for both the election of Trump and for a perceived crisis in American politics,¹⁴ we find that they are too often taken as “raw data,” assumed to speak transparently about the way things are for specific populations in specific regions of the United States—or worse, for the country as a whole. While many of us who have encountered ethnography in academic contexts are quite clear about its limitations, it bears repeating here that there is nothing transparent about ethnography.

Ethnography is an interpretive enterprise on multiple accounts and, considered within its history as an academic practice, it has long been understood as such. From the embodied encounters that constitute fieldwork practices to the writing of ethnographic field notes to the print publication of ethnographic narratives, the interpretation and translation (a kind of interpretation in and of itself) of lived cultural meanings constitute the ethnographer’s task.¹⁵ In our experience, the “vicissitudes of translation” that are definitive of ethnography as an academic practice—the difficult negotiations made in the act of translating fieldwork experience into narrative form—are foregrounded in graduate training for students of ethnography, and are also thoroughly reckoned with in the methodological discourses of anthropology, sociology, cultural studies, and related fields.¹⁶ For precisely these reasons, the popular embrace of ethnographic stories as straightforward explanations for our current political situation concerns us; from what we gather, the reception of these stories by popular audiences and their circulation in popular forums seems to be predicated on a number of misunderstandings about what ethnography is, what ethnographic practice can and cannot do, and what kind of explanations ethnographic narratives offer.

It is important to recognize, as a start, that the demographic categories that are mobilized in ethnographic work—in this case categories that refer to populations of rural and white laborers—are themselves constructed and accrue histories that bind their reference with

other cultural forms beyond the purview of ethnography.¹⁷ It is crucial to understand that ethnographic writing relies upon “expressive tropes, figures, and allegories” as it attempts to make legible the subject of its description.¹⁸ The demographic categories that are reified in ethnographic description are themselves contingent upon a whole series of tropes; in the case of the demographic category of the white working class, these tropes often connect working classness with longstanding cultural assumptions that relate more to the cultural arenas of education, tradition, and lifestyle, as well as the markers of geographic region (e.g., whiteness, ruralness, uneducatedness), than they do to the material conditions of class. It begins to seem as if references to culture are the only things that speak to class at all. We have to ask ourselves: *what is the relationship of culture to class?* In the context of cultural studies, this very problem—the question of how to adequately account for the cultural dimensions of class without losing sight of the structural analysis that is necessary for understanding class and its relationship to the broader workings of capitalism—has an important history, and has been the source of decades of debate.¹⁹ While we could not begin to recount those debates here with any justice, we do want to insist that the question remains unresolved.

One of the major risks of these ethnographic stories about resentful white workers, whether they hail from J.D. Vance’s Rust Belt hometown or the region of Louisiana that Arlie Hochschild has described as the “Super South,” is that they offer cultural explanations, often exclusively, for economic circumstances and political situations.²⁰ In asserting (a retrograde, values-rich, traditional, etc.) “culture” as an adequate framework for understanding economics and politics, these stories pathologize culture and mobilize already existing allegories about the causes of political and economic hardship. Offering narratives about rural “cultures of poverty” or white “cultures in decline,” ironically enough, these stories rehearse many problematic cultural narratives that have, in other instances, been used to explain the economic and political hardships experienced by people of color, most especially as an explanation for black poverty, reducing those lived hardships to symptoms of some “cyclical” form of cultural illness, always at the expense of eschewing (or outright denying) the role of systemic disenfranchisement.²¹ While we do not intend to suggest any equivalency between these two very different projects of cultural explanation, we find it necessary to notice when and how existing cultural explanations are reproduced.²²

J.D. Vance’s *Hillbilly Elegy* is particularly insidious in terms of its reliance upon cultural pathology as an explanation for class conditions, reinvigorating the allegory of a “culture of poverty” in a number of personal anecdotes that damn the white working poor, blaming them for their own hardship, suggesting that they are bound up in a cyclical cultural crisis defined by addiction and greed. Consider, for instance, this brief excerpt from his book:

During my junior year of high school, our neighbor Pattie called her landlord to report a leaky roof. The landlord arrived and found Pattie topless, stoned, and unconscious on her living room couch. Upstairs the bathtub was overflowing—hence, the leaking roof. Pattie had apparently drawn herself a bath, taken a few prescription painkillers, and passed out. The top floor of her home and many of her family’s possessions were ruined. This is the reality of our community. It’s about a naked druggie destroying what little value exists in her life. It’s about children who lose their toys and clothes to a mother’s addiction.²³

While startling in its graphic description, in conclusion Vance’s anecdote lands upon a moral indictment, and merely rehearses a story that we have already heard about the working (and not working) poor. It is a story that emphasizes their “undeserving” and “irresponsible” qualities, suggesting that they are doomed to repeat the failures that keep

them in a cycle of poverty. While Vance's book offers little analysis of the conditions that produce the circumstances in which things like addiction and parenting can become problems for the working poor—and while it has little to say about the systems that work to keep the poor poor—his book does offer a kind of explanation for poverty that hinges upon moral judgments of character and behavior. He summarizes his position succinctly: “This was my world: a world of truly irrational behavior. We spend our way into the poorhouse . . . We know we shouldn't spend like this. Sometimes we beat ourselves up over it, but we do it anyway.”²⁴ Recycling an allegorical narrative that moralizes and pathologizes the poverty cycle through the guise of a kind of cultural piety, dismissing it as the product of indulgence and greed, Vance blames workers for their plights and reifies the idea that their lifestyle can be explained away as “irrational behavior.” Hopefully, the dangers of this kind of narrative are clear to our readers. What remains worrisome to us, however, is that Vance's claim to firsthand experience, as supposedly a member of the demographic in question (notice the “we”), is being too readily acclaimed as authoritative in its vision of rural poverty,²⁵ especially by journalists who use his narrative to support their own political analyses.²⁶

Our major concern here, stated more directly, is that stories like the one offered by Vance participate in a broader trend in popular US thought that elevates the markers of working class *culture* far above the *material conditions* of class. In overemphasizing these cultural markers—markers that include education, health, family lifestyles, etc.—they forget to ask a question that should be central to the project of writing about the white working class (as an allegedly cultural group), or any working class at all: *what is the working class?* This is not to say that there is no white working class culture, but rather that in stories like the ones being offered by Vance (and Hochschild for that matter), the cultural markers of “working classness” are being disarticulated from (to the point of imprudently obfuscating) the changing material conditions that are definitive of the working class position, such that it is not even clear that the demographics narrated in these stories are working class at all.²⁷ In reifying a demographic category that means to refer to workers who are poor and white, and in doing so almost exclusively through an invocation of cultural tropes that signal “working classness,” these stories remain uncritical about how things have changed in the United States. Class is not as straightforward as this; it cannot be easily codified by cultural tropes, nor bounded by geographic regions or zip-codes: class is a structural position within the system of capitalism. What can we really claim to know about class by reading ethnographies about rural, white conservatives? Does being angry or white or rural or conservative necessarily make you working class? Aren't the relations between classes of workers in the present moment more complex than that? What do these stories really tell us about our current political situation?

2. The Problem of Taking Up Empathy & Blame as Political Strategies

A second major concern that we wish to raise in regards to the ethnographic accounts offered by Hochschild and Vance, as well as their numerous other contemporaries, is that the stories they tell are further amplifying a political mandate, quite vogue in the wake of Trump's election, that asserts interpersonal communication as an efficacious political strategy and suggests that our current crisis is the simple product of the Left's inability to adequately negotiate a national politics of feeling. To clarify, we do not doubt the significance and power of communication; in fact, we teach courses exclusively devoted to skillful communication practices and are well attuned to the importance of continuing to question how we all, regardless of our political dispositions, might learn to speak across our differences. Rather, we see that there is again a misunderstanding of the role played by this sort of strategy in relation to political change, and are concerned with the ways

that this focus misdirects political strategy on the Left by obfuscating our vision of capitalism and how it works. In the case of the so-called white working classes, the story is all too familiar: we all suffer the rage of angry workers, white and rural, because we ignore them. In too many instances, this leads to a schismatic condition on the Left. We tear back and forth between extremes in our reaction to the pervasive stories about white workers, recognizing them only as the subjects of either a nascent empathy (we must understand them!) or aggressive blame (it is all their fault!)—two sides of the same coin.

If we return to the two primary texts in question, Vance's *Hillbilly Elegy* and Hochschild's *Strangers in Their Own Land*, we can see how this kind of politics of feeling is exacerbated in the stories they tell, and also the ways in which their own political commitments have shaped their texts. Vance's text, as we have shown in the previous section, recites a narrative of cultural pathology and thus, concurrently, a "bootstraps" story about what is possible with a little hard work, ignoring the need for systemic understandings of class stratification. His text most readily espouses blame as the appropriate response to white "cultures in decline," suggesting not only that these cultural actors ought to be blamed for their own plight, but also that they are somehow responsible for the current political crisis.²⁸ In the end, his narrative of blame is still a kind of call for empathic understanding (thus, the other side of the empathy coin) that suggests the national preponderance of confusion in the wake of Trump's election is the direct result of a collective lack of understanding about rural (and white) lifestyles. And so it goes: if only we knew the white working poor, we wouldn't be surprised. We might also notice how Vance's formal claim to "memoir," his authoritative claim to speak as an "insider" to the "cultural group" in question, contributes to the distinctive tone of his appraisal. It is perhaps unsurprising that this particular claim to proximity supports his blunt and somewhat scathing capacity to incite blame, once and for all, as the appropriate emotional response to white workers and their role in the crisis, even as this "blame" is ostensibly meant to be a loving lecture to the white working class on the importance of self-responsibility.

By contrast, speaking to empathy from the other side of the fence—or, to borrow a phrase from her own parlance, the other side of the "empathy wall"—Hochschild emphatically suggests that the failure of the Left in the current crisis is a failure to understand and feel, intimately, the particular plights of white and rural populations. Self-proclaimed Berkeley liberal and professor emerita of sociology, Hochschild's investment in empathy as a political strategy is inherent to her entire ethnographic project, informing her research questions as well as her approach to fieldwork. Rather than the jaded insider—Vance's projected disposition—Hochschild positions herself as an ethnographer proper: the curious outsider wading into an unknown territory, framing her ethnography's subjects as "others," and establishing an "us and them" narrative from the outset. Consider this passage, for instance, that summarizes Hochschild's project by narrating her encounters with two ethnographic subjects:

As I walked with Mike Schaff through the sugarcane fields of the old Armelise Plantation, or sat with Madonna in the Living Way Pentecostal Church, I was discovering good people at the center of this Great Paradox. How could kindly Madonna oppose government help for the poor? How could a warm, bright, thoughtful man like Mike Schaff, a victim of corporate malfeasance and wanton destruction, aim so much of his fire at the federal government?²⁹

Describing her mission as a "journey into the heart of the right," and as an effort to "scale" the "empathy walls" that separate the well-intended Left from the conservative poor, Hochschild performatively invokes her own confusion as to how "good" people could practice such "bad" politics. In her book's concluding chapter, she reinstates her conviction that empathetic understanding just might be the cure for our most pressing

political problems, in the form of two letters: one letter is addressed from Hochschild to “a friend on the liberal left” and the other is addressed to Hochschild’s “Louisiana friends on the right.”³⁰ In both letters, she calls for empathy, for common understanding, and asserts the value of trying to understand how the politics of the “other side” are motivated by differential feelings, often feelings of anger and resentment.

We call the kind of political strategy proffered in Hochschild’s narrative, and also to a degree in the narrative offered by Vance (albeit somewhat differently), the *empathy mandate*. The empathy mandate, in its specific articulation to the white working class, suggests that our political situation will only continue to grow worse until we can find the adequate way to understand those white workers who (supposedly) are so much unlike ourselves. The empathy mandate has spawned a whole number of political strategies, among activists and well-intentioned intellectuals, that demand our political efforts be focused on engaging white working class Trump supporters in direct conversation with an intention to understand their worldview. One of the ironies of this mandate, of course, is that it renders empathy a merely strategic activity that is aimed at certain kinds of political gain. The paradox of this call—a call to, on the one hand, genuinely listen and understand and, on the other, maintain an agenda for partisan conversion—only further proliferates confusion on the Left. This is not even to mention the fact that it is not clear whether and how “the white working class” is in fact the “problem population” the Left must grapple with (empathetically or otherwise). Populist articulations of the feelings of racial and political/partisan resentment are not new among working, lower, and even middle classes in US history; neither is the political utility of calls to empathy.³¹

In many ways, we understand this impulse to empathy, and recognize in ourselves the kinds of political feeling that make it seem both practical and so obviously necessary. As graduate students, we enter the academy from communities and geographies not unlike those narrated by Vance and Hochschild: one of us hails from the trailer parks of rural Texas, an epicenter of poverty and addiction, and the other from a rural, conservative, farm town in the Blue Ridge Mountains of southwest Virginia. We have often felt that, especially in academic spaces, these communities and geographies are misunderstood, and are too readily invoked as scapegoats for the purposes of explaining white supremacy (as if liberal whites have no role in it) and political catastrophe (as in the case of explaining Trump).³² We do think that there is much to learn from the cultural practices and traditions that often define the lifestyles of white and rural populations—be they working class or otherwise—and probably equally as much about those cultures that needs to be pulled apart and critically questioned. The turn to empathy, as we see it, is not void of possibilities nor promises, but even still we question its viability as a strategy for achieving political change and as an explanation for understanding what is going on in America during (and after) Trump’s reign as president. To be more direct, we are concerned that the politics of feeling that emphasizes the “woundedness” of rural whites—and white conservatives writ large—has been far more successful on the right than it has on the left, particularly when it is sutured to a kind of cultural groupism (an appeal to all those who can claim affinity with white working classness, whether or not they are working class). As Adam King observed of Hochschild’s ethnography, this approach does not create the conditions for strategizing in working people’s interests; it instead instantiates “a vision of the world in which class unity is unthinkable. Or worse, a world in which ‘Trump [is] the identity politics candidate for white men.’”³³ We want to consider how we can redirect this energy not toward a mandated empathy directed at a political “other” but toward instead a class-based politics that emphasizes the potential affinities that emerge from the articulations that conjoin the material conditions of our experience together with our cultural experiences and feelings. The situation has become trite, all this vying for the “heart” of rural “working-class” whites, and we wonder what other political roads we

might travel, perhaps roads that lead instead toward working hands and feet and minds. Is there something alternative to playing into the politics of feeling already on offer?

3. The Problem of Our Political Situation

Finally, building on our arguments in the previous sections, our foremost concern is how the ethnographic stories we have discussed are being used to prescribe political thought and action in the current US crisis. To reiterate, we find it necessary to ask: *what happens when working class culture, or “working classness,” is disarticulated from the material conditions of class?* The question of the relationship between culture and economy, we again reiterate, is not new. Cultural studies work on class has long considered the ways economic and cultural categories are fused in experience. However, our concern is that when categories like “working class culture” or “white working class” are used in analysis, they are not historicized and contextualized, and the *question* of the fusion of economic and cultural factors—“how economic relations directly and materially intervene to shape people’s representations of the world”³⁴—is not made central. In this case, what we find are static, inconsistent, and nevertheless politically opportune mobilizations of a fictional and rhetorical white working class to energize political projects on the right: these projects have been successful in large part precisely because they have been able to divorce problems of culture (often in terms of race, but we also see it in terms of geography, values, taste, memory, and legacy) from issues of class position.³⁵ The political climate produced by such maneuvers has landed the Left in the midst of what we have discussed as a politics of feeling—but what does this particular politics of feeling get us? If the answer is, as it seems to be, *not much*, then we wonder if there is a way out. Above all, we want to imagine how our political *now* might be a ripe moment for re-thinking class and how class might be mobilized for a future politics: a politics that does not simply repeat old strategies of class-based organizing nor rely exclusively upon this politics of feeling. As intellectuals, it is not our argument that we should return to a more “traditional” kind of Marxist analysis per se, but rather that we can (and must) imagine a more complicated approach to class—as well as the relationship between class and culture—for the purpose of understanding how changing experiences of work or labor might produce unanticipated political possibilities and affinities.

We want to push back against the reduction of “working class” to an identity category or cultural marker, and at the same time we want to resist rehearsing old Marxist dismissals of the significance of culture (as merely the “superstructure” expressions of an economic “base”). What we want to insist upon is a reckoning with how class has changed. We cannot in any simple way presume to know how it works. We need better analytical tools and more adequate theories. Furthermore, especially in light of the whirlwind of emotions that are being catalyzed by ethnographic stories about white workers, we want to insist on the necessity of critical thought and contextual analysis as themselves direct contributions to the political struggle. In a moment when things seem so urgent and unhinged, it is easy to sweep criticism under the rug in favor of more direct forms of action, especially because good critical work takes time and its effects are hard to measure. Nevertheless, our analytical categories inform, at least to some degree, how we know to act (we have already discussed this in regards to the strategies related to the empathy mandate). Any political action we take, in other words, is necessarily predicated on the critiques we know how to articulate. For this reason, we ought to have good critiques.

Conclusion





In this essay, we have raised concerns about the popular success of contemporary ethnographies that focus on the rural and white “working class,” and have questioned the

ways that, in those ethnographies, “working class” has come to signify a range of cultural meanings that displace its meanings as a socio-economic reference. In doing so, we identified three major problems that relate to those ethnographies and how they have been taken up as political explanations. First, we argued that the ethnographies, in their popular circulation, are not being treated critically—as partial accounts of a limited cultural experience—and are instead being taken for granted as straightforward political and economic analyses. Second, we argued that the ethnographies are exacerbating the effects of existing narratives about the role of feelings in the contemporary political life of our country and further, that they are amplifying what we have called the “empathy mandate”—a mandate that demands that our political actions center on trying to understand misunderstood populations (in this case, the so-called “white working class”). Third, we argued that by disarticulating the cultural markers of “working classness” from the material conditions of class, the ethnographies are part and parcel of a political conundrum that requires from us more discernment and critical thought about just what “working class” means for our politics. In conclusion, we want to repeat that it is of utmost importance, especially in times of crisis, to stop and think about the stories that undergird our political actions and strategies. The ethnographies of “white working class” experience that we have engaged in this essay may be of use in this effort, but only if we treat them as small openings that lead to bigger and broader stories—as mere beginnings—rather than as complete and transparent explanations for what is going on.

Acknowledgements








This paper emerged from a research group committed to beginning the work of conjunctural analysis of the present led by Lawrence Grossberg. We are grateful to Larry for organizing this group and for raising questions and providing feedback on earlier versions of the arguments we present here, and also to our collaborator on this project, Jing Jiang. We also thank the anonymous reviewers of the manuscript, and the editors of *Lateral* for thinking our work a worthy contribution.

Notes

1. Nate Cohn, “Why Trump Won: Working-Class Whites,” *The New York Times*, November 9, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/10/upshot/why-trump-won-working-class-whites.html>. 
2. Alec MacGillis, “Revenge of the Forgotten Class,” *ProPublica*, November 10, 2016, <https://www.propublica.org/article/revenge-of-the-forgotten-class>; Helena Bottemiller Evich, *Politico*, November 13, 2016, <https://www.politico.com/story/2016/11/hillary-clinton-rural-voters-trump-231266>. 
3. Matt Flegenheimer and Michael Barbaro, “Donald Trump is Elected President in Stunning Repudiation of the Establishment,” *The New York Times*, November 9, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/09/us/politics/hillary-clinton-donald-trump-president.html?r=0>. 
4. Jonathan T. Rothwell and Pablo Diego-Rosell, “Explaining Nationalist Political Views: The Case of Donald Trump,” *Gallup*, November 2, 2016, <https://ssrn.com/abstract=2822059>; Nicholas Carnes and Noam Lupu, “It’s Time to Bust the Myth: Most Trump Voters Were Not Working Class,” *The Washington Post*, June 5, 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2017/06/05/its-time-to-bust-the-myth-most-trump-voters-were-not-working-class/>. 
5. Titles include the following, but there are many more: Nancy Isenberg, *White Trash* (New York: Penguin Books, 2017); Justin Gest, *The New Minority* (Oxford: Oxford


University Press, 2016); Arlie Russell Hochschild, *Strangers in Their Own Land* (New York: *The New Press*, 2016); Katherine Cramer, *The Politics of Resentment* (Chicago: *University of Chicago Press*, 2016); J. D. Vance, *Hillbilly Elegy* (New York: *HarperCollins*, 2016); Carol Anderson, *White Rage* (New York: *Bloomsbury*, 2017).












6. While some of the texts are memoirs, histories, or works of journalistic non-fiction, they are all “ethnographic” in the sense that they, like ethnography, take as their subject a specific group of people, understood as a cultural group, and also in the sense that they seek to offer interpretations of the meaning-systems that structure experiences within that group. In the same way that something in a form other than cinema might be described as “cinematic,” we refer to this whole body of literature as “ethnographic” to suggest that the texts that constitute it maintain a certain relationship to ethnography. 
7. For a discussion of how claims about white working class are not new and why that matters, see Lawrence Grossberg, *We All Want to Change the World: The Paradox of the U.S. Left: A Polemic* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 2016). 
8. Bob Burnett, “The Resistance Bookshelf,” *The Huffington Post*, July 7, 2017, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/the-resistance-bookshelf_us_595f8504e4b08f5c97d068d1. 
9. George Lakey, “Reaching Trump Supporters with the Promise of Vision,” *Resilience*, January 30, 2017, <http://www.resilience.org/stories/2017-01-30/reaching-trump-supporters-with-the-promise-of-vision/>. 
10. “How to Talk to Trump Supporters,” *Indivisible Berkeley*, June 17, 2017, <https://www.indivisibleberkeley.org/events/2017/6/17/how-to-talk-to-trump-supporters>. 
11. J. D. Vance, for instance, has made appearances on nearly every major news station and has even given his own TED Talk. Arlie Hochschild has appeared on Democracy Now and C-SPAN, among many other forums for coverage on current political affairs. This is only a sampling of the public life of these books and their authors, but we hope it is enough to support our claim that these books have found an unprecedented momentum in public and popular discourse. 
12. Walk into any of your local bookstores and you will likely see a table set up with a display of some selection of these titles featured together, propped up for customers to see, under some banner like “Current Affairs” or “US Politics” or “Understanding Trump.” You will see the small medals printed on the covers designating their awards and you will see “NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER” printed across their covers in bold. It seems likely that many who have never—or will never—read these titles will nevertheless know about these books and have a general sense of their explanatory value; individually and as a whole, these texts have secured status in terms of popular recognition. 
13. Furthermore, there are many examples of ethnographic writing on class and culture that we would deem “good” ethnography—complex accounts of the materialities of the lived experiences of class and culture—that we do not consider here. Many (if not most) of these “good” ethnographic texts circulate within academic contexts but rarely surface in the pools of popular readership. The ethnographic narratives that we examine in this article are of interest to us precisely because of their popular status. These texts, unlike many of their textual cousins in the academy, have made their way onto every Barnes & Noble display stand and Amazon homepage in the nation, their authors have been courted by mainstream news stations, and their arguments are cited by journalists from across the political spectrum. It is not the question of ethnographic efficacy that we take on here; rather, it is the question of the construction of popular opinion and political thought—for which, in the current

conjuncture, a particular breed of ethnographic narrative has become a primary resource. ↻

14. Ian Jack, "How a Memoir of Rust-Belt Family Life Caught the Spirit of Modern America," *The Guardian*, January 13, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/jan/13/rust-belt-america-jd-vance-hillbilly-elegy>. ↻
15. See, for instance, Clifford Geertz, "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture," in *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays by Clifford Geertz* (New York: Basic Books, 1973); Dwight Conquergood, "Rethinking Ethnography: Towards a Critical Cultural Politics," in *Cultural Struggles: Performance, Ethnography, Praxis*, ed. E. Patrick Johnson (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013). ↻
16. James Clifford quoted in Conquergood, "Rethinking Ethnography," 83. ↻
17. White working classness, as a characteristic or idea, is as much indebted to forms of literature and popular culture as it is to ethnographic or demographic research. From the literature and journalism of James Agee to, more recently, the television series *Duck Dynasty*, white working classness has become a marker defined in many ways by the aesthetic qualities of certain lifestyles and their representation in popular forms. ↻
18. James Clifford, "Introduction: Partial Truths," in *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, eds. James Clifford and George E. Marcus (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1986), 6-7. ↻
19. Richard Johnson, "Three Problematics: Elements of a Theory of Working-Class Culture," in *CCCS Selected Working Papers: Volume 1*, eds. A. Gray, J. Campbell, M. Erickson, S. Hanson, & H. Wood (London: Routledge, 2013). ↻
20. Juan Gonzalez, "What Drives Trump Supporters?: Sociologist Arlie Russell Hochschild on Anger & Mourning of the Right," *Democracy Now*, September 28, 2016, https://www.democracynow.org/2016/9/28/what_drives_trump_supporters_sociologist_arlie. ↻
21. We think, for instance, about the now-infamous 1965 report conducted by sociologist Daniel Patrick Moynihan *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*, also known as the "Moynihan Report," in which Moynihan articulates the perceived plight of poor, black families to a perceived crisis of black fatherhood. Rather than acknowledging the systemic workings of inequity and the after-effects of slavery, Moynihan (a well-intentioned liberal) affirms that the problem of black poverty hinges upon the cultural domain of family lifestyle, pathologizing single-headed black households, locating them as the source of the "problem." ↻
22. John Thomason, "Hillbilly Ethnography," *The New Inquiry*, November 29, 2016, <https://thenewinquiry.com/hillbilly-ethnography/>. ↻
23. Vance, *Hillbilly Elegy*, 145. ↻
24. Vance, *Hillbilly Elegy*, 146. ↻
25. An important note: Vance is now a wealthy conservative and has argued that government aid for the poor is a part of the problem, culturally rooted, that keeps rural whites in poverty. ↻
26. We find it shocking, for instance, that a review in the *New York Times* praises Vance's text, and bolsters its claim to authority, by describing it as "a compassionate, discerning sociological analysis of the white underclass that has helped drive the politics of rebellion, particularly the ascent of Donald J. Trump." Jennifer Senior,

“Review: In ‘Hillbilly Elegy,’ a Tough Love Analysis of the Poor Who Back Trump,” *New York Times*, August 10, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/11/books/review-in-hillbilly-elegy-a-compassionate-analysis-of-the-poor-who-love-trump.html>. 

27. In Hochschild’s narrative for instance, some of the subjects interviewed are business owners and entrepreneurs, and even still her book is heralded as a rap on the “white working class.” J.D. Vance still claims the title “working class,” and his claim is validated by many journalists unquestioningly, even though he is now quite wealthy and employed by a venture capital firm. This slippage between “working class” as a cultural signifier (or marker of identity) and “working class” as a structured position within capitalism, relates directly to our overarching concerns. 
28. Michael Barbaro, “Understanding the Trump Voter,” *New York Times*, August 19, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/19/podcasts/understanding-the-trump-voter.html>. 
29. Hochschild, *Strangers*, 23. 
30. Hochschild, *Strangers*, 233-236. 
31. Elsewhere, we unsettle the persistent theoretical links between education and class and easy assumptions about the relationship between material conditions, culture, and identity by examining the kinds of claims made of voting data, exit polls, and ethnographic narratives. We challenge the relationship of the “white working class” to Trumpism, and make the case that Trumpism involves an effort to assemble non-working-class allegiance to a particular political project through affective investment in some culturally crafted “working-classness”—a cocktail of *selective* nostalgia for the external characteristics of an archaized, nonconformist “working-class way of life” (traditions, values, speech, etc.), opposition to elitism, American exceptionalism and nationalism, and racial anxiety—disarticulated from the material conditions of class itself. We argue, in other words, that an idea of white working-classness, not by or for the materially working class, has become a feature of the current affective landscape. Megan Wood, Ryan Brownlow, Jing Jiang, “The Work of Working-Classness: Contesting Class in the Current Conjuncture,” *New Formations*, forthcoming in ‘This Conjuncture’ special issue. 
32. In the months after the election, the “white working class”—what some liberals called “low information voters”—was often appraised as responsible for Trump’s victory. The “revenge of working-class whites” became the dominant narrative, even months later when the American National Election study, the Rothwell study, and other thorough credible analyses thoroughly debunked that conclusion. 
33. Adam King, “Strangers and Enemies,” *Jacobin*, January 25, 2017, <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2017/01/hochschild-white-workers-trump-race-class/>. 
34. Patrick Joyce, “Review: Working Class Culture: Studies in History and Theory by John Clarke; Charles Critcher; Richard Johnson,” *Social History* 6, no. 3 (1981): 393–395. 
35. Nixon’s so-called “Southern Strategy” is a good example of how this has been mobilized in the past, and we can also see it in Trump’s campaign speeches, as well as his “Victory Tour” appeals to Rust Belt workers. 

 Bio



Ryan Brownlow

Ryan Brownlow is a doctoral student in the Department of Communication at the University of North Carolina - Chapel Hill. He writes about the contemporary performing arts, and is interested broadly in the changing nature of class, labor, and the arts in the United States. He also writes poetry and makes performance. Before joining the graduate program at UNC, Ryan studied Theatre and American Studies at Macalester College.

 [Bio](#)



Megan Wood

Megan M. Wood is a doctoral student in the Department of Communication at the University of North Carolina - Chapel Hill. Her research engages a number of issues from within Cultural Studies and feminism: corporate sovereignty, crises of care, forms and uses of surveillance, the construction of "working classness" in the US, and the political economy of authenticity. Her current project examines the figure of the transnational corporation and its role in shaping popular imaginations and feelings about "the state," "the market," and the relationship between them as a way to better understand the paradoxical positions and ambivalent affects that characterize contemporary politics. Her work has appeared in journals including *Communication Studies*, *Communication & Critical/Cultural Studies*, *Lateral: A Cultural Studies Journal*, *Review of Communication*, *Sexuality & Culture*, and the Duke anthology *Feminist Surveillance Studies*.



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ISSN 2469-4053